

Hanging out in the chimpanzee capital of the world

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According to Dr. D. Rick Lee, Alamogordo Primate Facility director, with more than 500 captive chimpanzees, Alamogordo has earned the distinction of being the chimpanzee capital of the world.

The chimps have a long history at Holloman and with the Air Force. Today, they are still at Holloman and have been removed from research.

In the late 1950s, the Air Force established a primate colony on Holloman Air Force Base to learn about the effects of space flight. These chimpanzees endured adverse conditions to help make space flight possible for humans. The Holloman chimpanzees first came to fame when Ham (the name was an acronym for Holloman Aero Medical) became the first chimpanzee in space.

Rocket man?

Three months before Alan Shepard became the first U.S. astronaut to travel in space, HAM paved the way by becoming the first “astro chimp” to rocket beyond the earth’s atmosphere in January 1961. NASA’s archives say, “Ham’s survival and performance, despite a

host of harrowing mischances . . . raised the confidence level of the astronauts and capsule engineers alike.” His reward was an apple.

HAM was then housed at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. He later moved to a zoo in North Carolina and lived with other chimps before eventually dying in 1983. He’s buried in Alamogordo at the International Space Hall of Fame.

Ten months later, another chimp named Enos successfully orbited the earth. During the mission, one of the capsule’s roll thrusters malfunctioned, causing it to tumble out of control. Later in the flight, the reward system also malfunctioned. Instead of being rewarded for a correct decision and shocked for pulling the wrong lever, the signals became reversed. But Enos performed flawlessly despite the malfunction. He died shortly after his flight.

While HAM, Enos and their colleague, Minnie, were the only chimps trained specifically for space travel, the 65 original primates were subjected to a variety of tests related to the space program, including impact, weightlessness and sleep deprivation studies.

Contract negotiations

By the late 1960s, interest in space research on chimpanzees waned. In 1970,

the National Institute of Health leased the chimpanzee colony to the Albany Medical College for research purposes. After the AMC, New Mexico State University controlled the colony, which then was switched over to the Coulston Foundation. The Coulston Foundation lost funding and their contract with NIH, so the colony was open to bids.

Charles River Laboratory Inc. submitted a bid organized by Dr. D. Rick Lee, and won the contract for the company. The company is the global leader in providing the animal research models required in research and development for new drugs, devices and therapies. After winning the contract, Lee was chosen as director of the facility, which was renamed the Alamogordo Primate Facility. The following year, the facility received national accreditation.

What a life

Over the years, the Alamogordo Primate Facility has become a home for 274 primates who have been removed from research. The chimps are housed in groups of six to 12. Each group is either all female or all male, because of the no breeding law passed in 1990. The majority of the primates in the facility were used in HIV and Hepatitis research. Many of them have been in-

fected with HIV, or Hepatitis viruses A, B and C and some have a combination of infections. The Holloman chimpanzees have made significant contributions that have led to the development of human Hepatitis vaccines.

“These primates have no place to go because of the viruses they harbor,” said Andrea Lee, Alamogordo Primate Facility program administrator. “Our mission is to give them the best quality of life that we can. We give them the best medical care possible and try to keep them happy. We figure they’ve paid their dues.”

To accomplish their goal, the facility has five veterinarians on staff, including Dr. Lee, who is one of the top primatologists in the nation. They have 43 employees, a full-time behaviorist, four enrichment technicians and a full-time trainer. “We have a trainer because any human illness humans can get, the chimps can also get, such as diabetes,” she said. “So the trainer teaches them, for instance, to present their heel or finger for a blood prick, so we know whether they need insulin. It’s traumatizing for them to be knocked out, so we prefer to have someone train them.”

Another part of their mission at the Alamogordo Primate Facility is enrichment and ensuring every chimp can go outside. The cages at the primate facil-

ity are spacious and lead outside to a play yard with swings and other play equipment, but the facility plans on improving living conditions with “Primadomes.” Primadomes, which are a large dome-style enclosures with playground equipment inside, were invented by Dr. Lee. He plans to build five domes per building to enhance enrichment and exercise.

Another form of enrichment is fresh fruit. The chimps also get a different kind of restaurant-quality fruit almost every day.

The residents

The oldest chimp in the facility is 40 years old. The youngest, at age 6, are four sisters, Madison, Aiah, Tessa and Robbie. The Coulston foundation took them off their mother when they were born, so they were raised in a nursery.

“These four have never been subjected to any kind of testing and are totally clean and safe,” said Lee. “They are very friendly girls and they’ll give kisses. We invite anybody who works on Holloman to come out to see them on a driving tour of the facilities.”

Call the Alamogordo Primate Facility at 679-3802 to schedule a tour. No children under 16 are allowed to tour the facilities because of the health status of the chimps.



Courtesy photo

A trainer at the Alamogordo Primate Facility visits with the chimps.

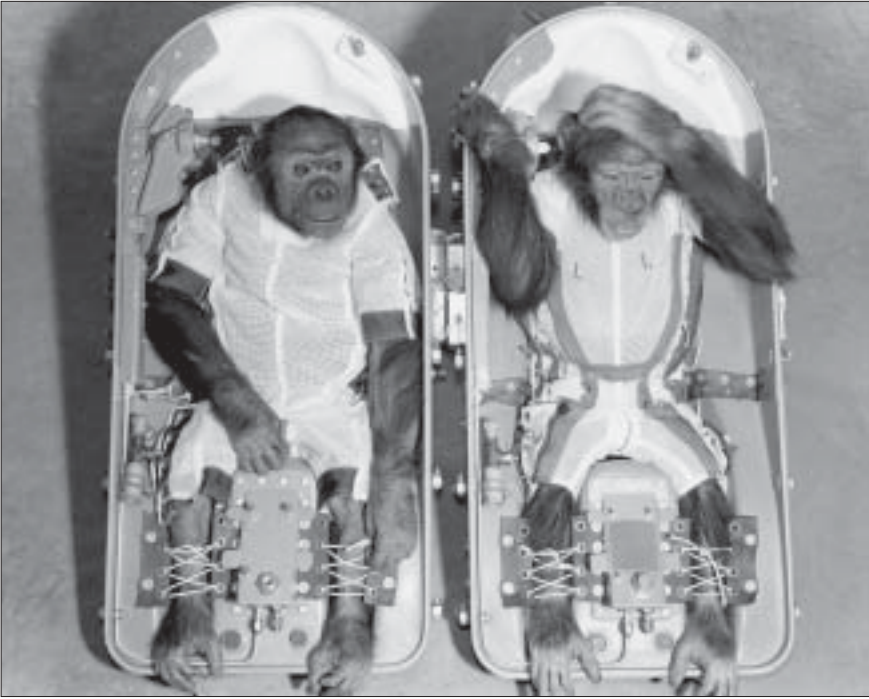


Courtesy photo

Chimps make a splash at the pool.



Courtesy photo



Courtesy photo

Top: Enos (left) and Ham (right) were the only two astro chimps sent into space.

Left: Dr. D. Rick Lee feeds one of the younger chimps.



Photo by Airman 1st Class Vanessa LaBoy

Tessa, one of the four young primates at the Alamogordo Primate Facility, smiles for the camera.